

Does the White-eyed River-Martin *Pseudochelidon sirintarae* breed in China?

EDWARD C. DICKINSON

Although it is almost twenty years since the discovery and description of the White-eyed River-Martin *Pseudochelidon sirintarae* (Thonglongya 1968), there has been no success in improving our knowledge of the species. All records have been from Bung Boraphet, a reservoir and marsh in central Thailand; after the initial nine specimens were collected, a further individual was taken in November 1968 (Thonglongya 1969), two birds were 'found' in 1972 (King 1978–1979), six adults were seen in February 1977 (King and Kanwanich 1978), and four immatures were seen in January 1980 (Sophasan and Dobias 1984). All records have been from November to February, the winter period.

Speculation about the species's breeding distribution has been limited. Thonglongya (1969) searched for it without success along three large rivers north of Bung Boraphet in May and June 1969. However, King and Kanwanich (1978) noted that if it nests in river sand flats in Thailand it must do so in March and April, as the monsoon rains from May onwards would render water levels too high. They also commented that the bird may nest 'somewhere in China'.

North of the 'golden triangle' opium-growing area (where Thailand, Laos and Burma meet) lie the closely parallel valleys of the Salween, Mekong and Chang Jiang. This area of south-western China is certainly a possible summer home for the White-eyed River-Martin, but the Chinese ornithological literature does not record it, although explorations there have not been very thorough.

In May 1972 the Sun Fung Art House, a Hong Kong sales outlet of some Beijing studios, had in its stock a set of four scroll paintings of which one (see front cover) bore a superficial resemblance to the River-Martin. A closer look revealed both similarities (the head and bill shape, the white eye, the coloration, and the existence of elongated tail feathers) and differences (the bill was red not yellow, the white rump was absent, and the elongated tail feathers were the outer not the central ones).

The methodology of illustration in Chinese paintings is to pass on styles and subjects. Allowing for artistic licence either over time or simply over the distance between some remote Chinese area and Beijing, and as the species is unknown to China's ornithologists, any original drawing is most likely to have been made in the field. With no inspection of a museum skin possible, it seems seriously likely that the River-Martin has been found and sketched, at some time, in China.

The handbooks on which Chinese painters draw for their subjects are full of Barn Swallows *Hirundo rustica*, and the bird in this illustration is too deliberately different to be intended as a Barn Swallow. The objection that the picture might be based on the illustration (by Dr. Boonsong Lekagul) that accompanied the original description can be discounted because (a) the description had very limited circulation, (b) the proprietor of the Sun Fung Art House felt that the picture had been painted no later than 1970, (c) the bird depicted is simply too unlike Dr. Boonsong's illustration.

The plate shows the Chinese inscription that accompanied the picture, with the artist's signature beneath it. If a student of such paintings could assist in tracking down the artist and the date of the picture, we might possibly get a clue as to where to look in China for the nesting grounds of the White-eyed River-Martin. Until then it seems destined to remain one of the most elusive species in the world.

REFERENCES

- King, B. and Kanwanich, S. (1978) First wild sighting of the White-eyed River-Martin, *Pseudochelidon sirintarae*, *Biol. Conserv.* 13: 183-185.
- King, W. B. (1978-1979) *Red Data Book, 2. Aves*. Second edition. Morges, Switzerland: International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources.
- Sophasan, S. and Dobias, R. (1984) The fate of the 'Princess Bird', or White-eyed River Martin (*Pseudochelidon sirintarae*). *Nat. Hist. Bull. Siam Soc.* 32: 1-10.
- Thonglongya, K. (1968) A new martin of the genus *Pseudochelidon* from Thailand. *Thai Natn. Sci. Pap. Fauna Ser.* no. 1.
- Thonglongya, K. (1969) Report on an expedition in northern Thailand to look for breeding sites of *Pseudochelidon sirintarae* (21 May to 27 June 1969). Unpublished.

Edward C. Dickinson, Chemin du Chano 8, 1802 Corseaux, Switzerland.

Plate. Incription and artist's signature on painting of a possible White-eyed River-Martin.
Photo: Didi Brandt.

